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ABSTRACT

Observations and recommendations are presented from a seminar in which 25 practicing special educators (teachers, administrators, and specialists) from New York State meeting for 5 full days over a period of months participated. A section of general observations notes that the special education system has taken too much upon itself and has fostered too much parental dependence upon the system. This is followed by a section of general recommendations, which address the issues of mainstreaming, regular and special education cooperation, individualization, transition, and creation of a Student Services Team. Specific observations and recommendations are then made on the issues of students, curriculum, the Regent's Action Plan, related services, mainstreaming, personnel, parents, and the community. Examples of recommendations include: (1) regular and special education teachers and administrators must be held accountable for outcomes in special education; (2) staff development and planning time needs to be considered as an integral part of the professional role; (3) parents should have more control over the process of their child's education; (4) more community utilization of school facilities should be allowed; (5) peer tutoring should pair regular students with students with special needs; (6) college preparation of teachers should include student teaching experiences with students with special needs; (7) stronger team approaches are needed; and (8) self-concept curriculum should be integrated into special education programs. (JDD)

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A VIEW FROM THE INSIDE

A Report of the Select Seminar on Special Education

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A View from the Inside



Report of the Select Seminar on Special Education

June, 1989

Sponsored by:
The Capital Area School Development Association
School of Education, University at Albany
State University of New York

Special Education Training and Resource Center

Greater Capital Region Teacher Center

A View from the Inside

Report of the Select Seminar on Special Education

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Preface

The following report presents a series of observations and recommendations made by a group of twenty-five practicing special educators (teachers, administrators and specialists) during the course of five full days of discussion spread out over several months. This report should be viewed as a "snapshot" in time of the reflections of this group as it engaged in a conversation that achieved no final consensus and arrived at no perfect solutions. Rather, we hope the reader will be able to share in the insights and beliefs of this group who, on a daily basis in our schools and agencies, struggle with the issues discussed in the report.

Principles guiding the CASDA select seminars include:

1. Participants need time to share ideas, reflect upon experiences and to write. Seminars are conducted with blocks of meeting time, spaced to allow reflections, and a final intensive two-day retreat.
2. A conducive working environment emphasizes the importance of the conversations. The seminars are conducted in a "protected environment" away from the work site. To convey that there are high expectations for seminar results, special care is taken to provide quiet, aesthetically pleasing surroundings and superior quality food and service.
3. The seminar participants are the experts. The central belief on which the seminar series was founded is "that consciously competent teachers and administrators are the best arbiters of educational practice." The select seminars are successful because of the high degree of personal and professional respect afforded participants.
4. Roles are "checked at the door." Ideas at the select seminar stand on their own. Position, prior experience and education of participants creates no inhibition.
5. Seminars are self-governing, with organizers serving the group. The coordinators of the seminar provide the initial structure and on-going logistical support. Governance and direction of the seminar gradually transfer to the participants with the coordinators being directed by the seminar group at its conclusion.
6. The experience is at least as important as the product. All seminar participants agree that the process, the communication, is most important. The report documents the experience and validates the effort and energy of the participants.

The Seminar Participants

Ann Bowen
Administrator,
Wildwood School

David Byran
Administrator,
Parsons Child & Family Center

Edward Carey
Teacher,
Iroquois Middle School,
Niskayuna Central

Darlene Egelston
Administrator,
Parker Elementary School,
Brittonkill

Florence Fielman
Teacher,
Troy Vo-Tec Center

Susan Griffing
Teacher,
Greenwich Central School

Melodee Lee James
Teacher,
Hackett Middle School,
Albany City Schools

Karen Kelley
Teacher,
Stevens Elementary School,
Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake

Susan McCuen
Teacher,
Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk
Senior High School

Ann Marie Murray
Teacher,
Ballston Spa High School

John Quatrini
Administrator,
Amsterdam City
School District

Donald Roche
Teacher,
Berkshire Farm U.F.S.D.

Tricia Maksail
Administrator,
Berne-Knox-Westerlo
High School

Eleanore Rosenberg,
Administrator,
St. Anne Institute

Mary VanDerzee
Teacher and Coordinator,
Work/Study Program for
Special Ed High School
Students, Rensselaer
Middle School

Diana Vaughn
Teacher,
Albany-Schoharie-Schenectady
BOCES

Theresa Ward
Teacher,
Albany-Schoharie-Schenectady
BOCES

Seminar Coordinators

Nelson Armlin
Associate Director,
Capital Area School
Development Association

Diane Cornell
SETRC Training Specialist,
Rensselaer-Columbia-Greene
BOCES

Bonnie J. Dekin
Children's Specialist,
New York State Office of
Advocate For the Disabled

Peggy Jo Wallis
SETRC Training Specialist,
Albany-Schoharie-Schenectady
BOCES



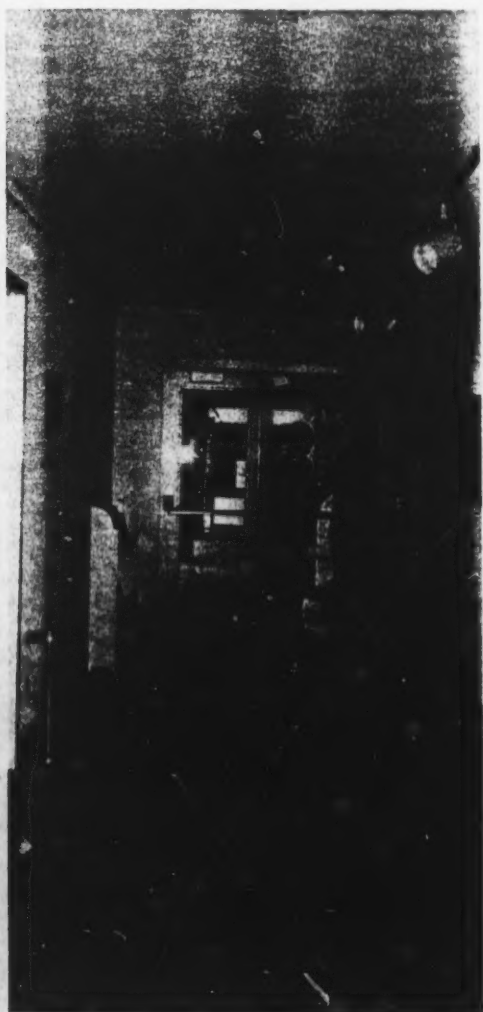


We extend our appreciation to Bonnie J. Dekin, Children's Specialist, New York State Office of Advocate For the Disabled, for writing and editing the final report.

Introduction

"What the best and wisest parent wants for his own children, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy." (John Dewey, *Schools and the Society*, 1900)

Where are we going with some of our programs? Are we headed in the right direction?



Special education is a new field in many ways and the first years were a reaction to a deplorable state of affairs. The focus was that "we have to do something, we have to make it better." Initially, special education allowed children who had formerly been excluded to enter the educational system. This was the beginning of the integration of services. The process is still in its formative stages. Special education remains a separate entity within the educational system. Teachers are trained separately. Students are pulled out of their classrooms and out of their schools. Our efforts as a group were to try to find ways in which the process of integration could be furthered. Ideally, schools should be responsive to the needs of all children. All children are unique individuals with different interests, learning rates, and learning styles. All children should be given the opportunity to succeed from the moment they enter kindergarten.

In the past ten years, special education has grown up and taken on new dimensions. We have fine-tuned identification procedures, and we have increased the level and types of services available to children identified as having a handicapping condition. Although we have become more knowledgeable and skilled in our field, the issues related to special education have become increasingly complex. The participants in the Special Education Select Seminar see the current process as failing students in a number of ways.

The educational system, as it now exists, is overtaxed by the sheer number of students that are identified as needing some type of special service outside of the traditional classroom structure. Classroom space is at a premium, and many school districts are finding little or no space available within their buildings to house not only their special classes, but BOCES classes as well. As a result, it is common for a BOCES class to move year after year from district to district, seeking a home. The sad result is that those children who require the greatest stability and consistency in their educational program are getting the least.

For those students who receive all of their schooling in a special setting there is no consistent structure in place to ensure that their transition from one type or level of program to another is smooth and of benefit to them.

Fragmentation of programming occurs when children with handicapping conditions are pulled out of the classroom to receive various support services. Increased curricular demands cause us to question the effectiveness of pull-out programs when weighed against the student's overall educational program. Over the last several years we have been providing services such as O.T., P.T. and medical services, regardless of whether anyone can demonstrate an educational link. Very often we provide three times a week of everything, whether or not it is necessary or has a proven long-term benefit for the child. How can we say "no"?



Many people have lost sight of the normal curve of human ability. Not everyone will perfect the Palmer method of handwriting. Not everyone will pronounce his or her words correctly. Not everyone's abilities will be in the fiftieth percentile or above. Some people will have poor handwriting, some will have poor visual-spatial skills and will not be able to get from point a to point b without a map and a personal guide. An expectation has been developed in many circles that "if you are going to supply this for my child, then I want the whole shot. I want everything." Whether that attitude comes from an agency, a parent, a regulation, or wherever, there is the expectation that this child must be average in everything, that we cannot allow weaknesses, faults or differences.

What is the ultimate goal? We cannot talk about beginning until we focus on the end. Do we expect all of these children to learn how to read? If we do, we ought to say so and create a program to do that. But if we do not expect that, we have to stop kidding ourselves and everyone else and begin to create a curricula and programs so that when these children are finished with our system they are productive, contributing members of the community.

The special education system has taken too much upon itself and in so doing has fostered too much parental dependence upon the system. There has been a shifting of responsibility away from the family and on to the special education system. Some of this must be given back to the parents. Special education faces the same burden that the regular education system does. The problems that we are facing today in special education are so enmeshed in our overall educational system that regular education and special education can no longer be viewed separately. The expectations are so high on so many fronts. It begins in preschool when we fight the concept of "let's cure everybody" and continues throughout the system. At the other end, looking back, we wonder why we didn't teach our students the functional skills they need for survival.

The classroom staff are caught in the middle. Resources are scarce and we are not communicating with each other. The expectations may be too high. We must decide what it is we want to accomplish. We do not have a clear picture of that yet. We have not figured out what special education is supposed to be, or who is responsible for which piece. We need to be flexible and to grow, but we also need to determine the direction we must take. It is time for us to understand that, to evaluate what we have and where we stand.

We must educate the public so that they understand that persons with disabilities are capable of full participation in society and in performing a job.

General Observations

"The goal of all special education programs should be to provide students with the skills necessary to live as independently as possible—to reach their potential intellectually, socially and vocationally."

"Ideally, schools should be responsive to the needs of all students."

"There is no special education, just education."

"The pre-K issues are critical. Programming for children from birth through two and three through five will be split between the Department of Health and the State Education Department further confusing the issues that are, at present, a hodgepodge of different regulations being promulgated by county administrators who are not involved with special education and wish only to cut costs. Even our own colleagues teaching school age special education do not seem to be aware of the importance that pre-K issues be resolved and they will receive these kids at age 5."

"Special education is:

- an equalizer;
- catch up ball;
- constantly adapting."

"Special education should:

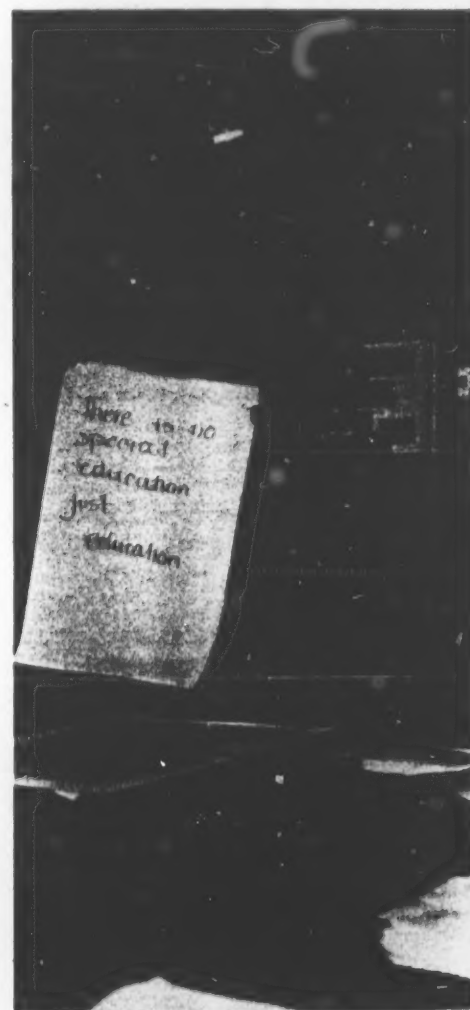
- prepare students with the skills and experiences that will enable them to succeed socially, academically, and vocationally just like regular education;
- parallel regular education as much as possible;
- be an integrated part of the system;
- provide the opportunity to return to the mainstream and offer the support services necessary to do it successfully;
- be child centered, with an awareness of the family context."

Let's try to come up with some creative and responsive service delivery systems; build programs around students and not students around programs.

General Recommendations

1. Because students have different interests, different styles and learning rates, we need to rework our goals in all of education, and to completely restructure our educational system so that a variety of needs may be met in a systematic way.

Ultimately, who is responsible for the outcomes? As a society, how much are we willing to do?



***H**ow can we provide quality in a trailer?*



2. Rethink the focus of regular education so that fewer students are identified as needing special services and more are able to have their needs met in the regular classroom setting.
3. Special education teachers must work on a cooperative basis with regular classroom teachers.
4. Build the goals and objectives of support systems around the activities in the special education curriculum in order to provide continuity to the child's program and to relate more meaningfully to his or her school work.
5. Establish a committee to oversee, for at least one year, the transition of students from preschool to school age-special education, from special education settings to regular classrooms and from special education to the world of work.
6. This committee should be charged with keeping records of student progress and giving feedback to the sending institution on how the preparation of students can be improved to ensure greater success.
7. Each school should have a student services committee. This committee would regularly review the progress of all the students in the school. It would be charged with identifying those students who were having problems in school and making a referral for supportive services, which would include, but not be limited to, referrals to the CSE.
8. The Committee on Special Education (CSE), could be eliminated altogether with the establishment of a Student Services Team (SST). The SST would consist of a team of professionals who would review the needs of *all* students experiencing difficulty in school. The team would arrange for appropriate evaluations and recommend programs and services within the entire spectrum of regular and special education.
9. The Student Services Team should be established at a building, rather than at a district level. In most cases, this would decrease the number of students a team would be responsible for, allow for greater awareness and utilization of resources available within the immediate setting and provide for more opportunities to observe and monitor the student's responses within that particular school environment.
10. The Student Services Team could remedy some of the limitations of the CSE by dealing with a "full" continuum of services and by putting regular and special education under the same roof. Service delivery models could become more flexible and creative, with better coordination of services, closer monitoring of success and more effective long-range planning for students. Students need not be labeled, but receive different levels of service, experience different learning environments and materials and different teaching strategies. Even the content of the curriculum could be specially designed to meet the unique needs of individuals.

Students

The common thread that bound us together throughout all of our discussions was our concern for the students we teach and are responsible for. During the course of the seminar we expressed our fears that we may not be succeeding with them and our hopes in their potential and in our ability to change the system for their benefit.

Observations

There is a wide range of ability among students with handicapping conditions and regular education students who are experiencing learning problems. There are very few program options available.

"To become a productive and responsible adult, a child needs a useful and self-respecting past, one that gives him or her a sound sense of self-worth and a future worth anticipating." (Dr. Albert Solnit, in Foreword to S. Prunce and A. Nagler, *Working With Disadvantaged Parents and Their Children*, 1983).

... With the exception of resource room students, most special education students are isolated academically and socially. The isolation is difficult to explain to special students and has a definite impact on their self-image. Also, because the self-contained classroom students are not included in the mainstream of school life, they are not understood by the regular students but viewed as outsiders and as different.

... Special education students are isolated socially and academically.

... Ownership should be expected of and accepted by the regular classroom teacher. This must be supported by the special education and the resource room teacher. These are society's children to begin with and to specialize them too much is not in their best interests. I have a disabled child of my own. I am facing the ownership issue. Everyone has their view of the problem and wants their piece of his day. But it is the family who will always have this child. I believe that planning should be long-term—where do we want this child to be in two or seven or twenty years from now?



- ... Too often they have a poor self-concept.
- ... Students are pulled out of their classrooms and out of their schools.
- ... Programs for these students are too separate, too fragmented, not integrated.
- ... So many people want a piece of the youngster that a child who may have a fragmented home life also has a fragmented school life. We are not doing justice to the child.
- ... There is a lack of services for the "at-risk" student.
- ... There are not enough curriculum options available for students.
- ... Transitions from program to program are difficult.
- ... We need to look at what we are expecting of all students. The load is becoming heavier and the Regent's Action Plan does not help. When too many students fall by the wayside, it is the school that needs to be fixed, not the students.
- ... Students come to my class from many different environments, DFY facilities, institutions, and schools that students have been kicked out of for various reasons. These students have been moved so often that they arrive at my classroom door with few, if any, high school credits. These students are now fifteen or sixteen and are looking at another four or five years of school in order to graduate.
- ... Many of my students come from broken families or heavily populated areas where they feel different from their peers. Many students turn to drugs and alcohol as an escape route. These problems make the student's school life just about impossible. Concentration and behavior are, of course, adversely affected. Suggestions for improvement are hard to come by. Students definitely need counseling. But how do we get the family to accept the idea of family counseling?
- ... We must do a better job of finding the students who need counseling and of getting these students the counseling they so desperately need.
- ... For other students, irreplaceable instructional time is lost when they are shuffled around from program to program in search of the perfect one to meet their educational needs.
- ... Depending on a student's performance on a variety of standardized tests, he or she may be in a regular class, go to a resource room for reading, go to PSEN for a half hour or more each day, a Chapter 2 program for writing, or possibly to a speech pathologist for speech or language development. All of this in one school day is overload. We are taking a low achieving student and expecting him or her to juggle a myriad of activities that usually are not related.

***I**t has occurred to me
that it really is
as simple as that;
we do not have a clear idea
of what we are supposed
to be doing.*



***I** think it's sad
that we are in the
state we are in right
now in special education.*

The proposal for an emphasis on functional skills for certain students is not an issue that should now be dropped into the lap of the already over-burdened special education teacher. This is an issue that needs to be addressed by all educators. It should not be viewed exclusively as a special education issue.

...Most school districts and BOCES programs are failing in the goal of preparing students with handicapping conditions to be successful, self-supporting contributors to society. The state mandated focus on competency issues only prolongs the agony and contributes to the future growth of unemployment and the resultant dependency on state supports.

...Even though we have become more sophisticated in our identification procedures, our educational system is too late in identifying some students who have handicapping conditions. Students may not be properly identified until they are ten or eleven years old. Although the reasons for this may be somewhat obscure, the result is the loss of valuable time in educating the child.

...With increasing demands on children who enter the school system, I would like special education to take more of a preventive role by going to the first and second grades and using different approaches with the slow readers, making sure that these students experience success instead of the sense of frustration that leads to early school failure.

...I don't believe that kids who are culturally different who have problems as a result of their environment are necessarily handicapped, even if they are failing in school. This relates to the "dumping ground" issue, where kids who do not meet the norm are not welcome in a regular classroom setting. While such students may indeed need services of some kind, I do not believe that it is really advocacy to label them as handicapped and to provide needed services to them via special education.

...The student who is emotionally disturbed is often mislabeled or, simply because of his behavior, placed with students who are more severely disabled. Often the result of this is that the student with emotional problems is not in a setting where there are enough opportunities for academic, social or vocational development.

...We need to better monitor the drug and alcohol problem. Once we find that a student is having problems in school caused by drugs we need to find a way of getting him or her help right away.



Curriculum

More programs in language development and reading readiness skills are needed. If an emphasis was placed there we would have less need for remedial programs.



The curriculum is what we depend on to move us from goals to accomplishments. For students, teachers and administrators in special education there are many unresolved issues concerning curriculum. We questioned whether some of the changes and requirements in recent years would move us closer to or farther away from our goals. One thing that we agreed on was that most students leaving the special education system are not well enough prepared to meet the challenges that await them. This knowledge leads us to a number of concerns about the content of the curricula we use.

Observations

...As educators we are charged with preparing students for their lives after public school. What form that preparation takes depends upon the student's interests and abilities. There are many students with learning disabilities in our secondary schools, who with adapted curriculum, can be successful with a content-oriented approach. But our schools are not doing an adequate job of preparing those students who enter the secondary level as non-readers, despite a dozen different instructional approaches by a dozen different specialists.

...What these students need at this point is help preparing themselves for the world of work. Their school instruction needs to include functional reading and math, vocational training, survival skills, social skills and problem solving and decision making strategies.

...The Regent's Action Plan has put these students and their teachers in a pressure cooker. It is resulting in more classroom time devoted to preparing this population for academic standards they are unlikely to achieve, and which have little or no relevance to their future lives.

...We like to say in special education that we gear our students for success by building upon their strengths. But what we are doing in actuality is, too often, just the opposite. We program these students to fail. And, because of that, we heighten the probability of witnessing an increasing number of students dropping out of school and failing on the job.

...What is called for is not an either/or situation, but rather an intended outcome situation. We should decide as educators what we want to happen for each child. What is needed is an increased number of curriculum options and an earlier decision about which way a student will be directed.

...There is a need for us to reassess whether it is in the child's best interest to get full blown academic programming or whether it is more appropriate to be teaching functional and pre-vocational skills. The needs of the child should be the driving force behind the curriculum development. Instead of responding to mandates, programs must determine what the child's real needs are in order for him or her to lead a successful life. Before this can be done, we must re-evaluate our own expectations for children with special needs as well as the criteria we use in determining who receives services.

... All children are individuals with different interests, learning rates and learning styles. All children should be given the opportunity to succeed. Mastery or competency based learning in a wide range of areas from academics to social and vocational skills would allow students to learn at variable rates.

... Competency based learning modules could be developed for a variety of specific areas, as well as for general academic, vocational and social skills. Examples of some possibilities are as follows:

- social skills needed for success in a mainstreamed setting
- transitional skills (how to deal with change in general, as well as preparatory skills for specific transitions, i.e., from preschool to school, school to Vo-Tech, school to work)
- decision making, problem solving
- how to be assertive
- college prep
- study skills
- learning strategies
- test taking skills
- pre-vocational skills, including career education
- functional skills needed for daily living

By using a competency based modular system, students could participate in a variety of program options geared to their individual needs and interests.

... Where are we going? Where will the student be in five or ten years? As educators we should be helping students develop skills, functional skills for the future. Are we giving students skills that they can be proud of, skills that will make them more independent, or are we building frustration?

... Affective education appears to have become the forgotten curriculum. As outside pressures continually increase, the availability of people to deal with these issues is not increasing and often is greatly lacking. Yet these issues often are the most crucial ones to be dealt with so that the remediation and special instruction can be most beneficial to the handicapped student.



... At risk students are under increased pressure and are more likely to be referred for special education because of the new Regent's Action Plan regulations. Societal changes, one parent families, drugs, etc., have become significant additional factors in dealing with this student population.

... Vocational training is a crucial issue. Many special needs students are not getting vocational training early enough. Often times the parent and the special needs teacher are not aware of the importance of this training because they do not know what the objectives and goals of vocational training are. Trial employment is essential for students with mild disabilities. The present JTPA guidelines allow for one year of programming. This is not enough time in many cases for these students to master work-skills. Legislative guidelines at the federal level which allow for greater flexibility in programming for youngsters with disabilities are needed.

... Transition is another important issue. The transition of severely disabled students to adult services has come a long way, but still does not meet the need. Transitioning of higher functioning students to successful adulthood is an even greater problem. We must train our students for independence after high school so that they are able to get and keep jobs and be less reliant on others for support. The problems and concerns of aging out are critical and must be addressed by all special education providers. Too much of the focus at the secondary level is on academics and not enough is on pre-vocational skill development. In the rush to meet the Part 100 mandates and competency tests, no time is left for adequate pre-vocational preparation. Students require specific training before they enter the world of work. Options for credit bearing courses and for working in the community where students must meet specific criteria for successful work behaviors is needed.



The Regent's Action Plan— Some Observations

...I believe that in many situations meeting the Commissioner's regulations on equivalency of instruction is an impossibility, especially the regulations that require teachers to be certified in a specific content area. I believe that any well trained teacher can teach almost any course material with appropriate support services and consultation with teachers who are expert in those specific areas.

...The Part 100 regulations seem to be in direct conflict with the general intent of the Part 200 special education continuum of services model. The Part 100 regulations place an unfair burden on students with handicapping conditions beginning at the seventh grade level.

...More remedial programs have been developed, some of which duplicate existing services, so that students can get a diploma. The impact has been to hinder mainstreaming because the classes have become too academic.

...The Regent's Action Plan has an elitist component that addresses the top 50% of students, which increases pressures on districts and regular educators to have all of their students achieve at "acceptable" levels. This in turn can lead to unnecessary and inappropriate referrals to special education. The other side of it is that it has increased expectations for some students with disabilities who have met the requirements and consequently, achieved more in school.

...Cooperation from regular education administrators is required, but not often found. We must be realistic about providing students with job skills. Mainstreaming must be re-defined in more realistic terms as it relates to the acquisition of needed vocational skills. SED should provide a blueprint that would help orchestrate the process.

...The gradual increase in class sizes as more students are identified as needing services has placed an additional burden on the classroom teacher. Consequently, there has been a reluctance on the part of even the best teacher to accept the student with special needs into the regular classroom.

...The Part 100 regulations should provide an umbrella to guarantee program adequacy for integrated and special classes. Some of the requirements, e.g., foreign languages, additional math, science and art requirements may be desirable, but not critical, to optimum programs for students with handicapping conditions. On the other hand, the Part 100 regulations can guarantee program accessibility to all students. Local administrators are hesitant to provide these programs, not because of the specific cost, but because of the implications for their regular student programs. Together the Part 100 and Part 200 regulations can be a starting point for insuring program adequacy if teachers and administrators are educated and trained to access the SED personnel responsible for overseeing implementation.

...Students should be granted exemptions from unrealistic Part 100 requirements for graduation, not wholesale, but specific exemptions subject to review.



Thoughts on Related Services

We would like to have heard more from professionals from the various related services disciplines. Although there were many practitioners at the first Special Education Conference, none of them were members of the Select Seminar. Special education can only succeed through partnerships and collaborative efforts on all levels. Teachers and therapists alike strive to improve services and programs for students with special needs and there are many areas of potential conflict and misunderstanding. We all need to listen more to each other and to strive to reduce the regulatory and professional barriers that often set us against one another.

Observations

...Providing related services such as occupational, physical, and speech therapy - as well as transportation for after school activities - is difficult. Therapists are often over-loaded, which limits the flexibility of the schedules. Home school districts are sometimes reluctant to provide transportation for a variety of reasons. This further frustrates the student and perpetuates their isolation.

...You may have five equally excellent professionals choosing to concentrate on different areas of speech/language with the same child. There are no guidelines or priorities that exist to help a therapist choose the areas of concentration. When therapists are changed from year to year, as is often the case, continuity of programming is lost.



...The question is: how do we provide all of the mandated services in the time available? This is especially difficult in related services where a student may be pulled out to receive the service, thereby missing valuable instructional time in the classroom. The student will then need additional time in school in order to earn a diploma.

...We (related service personnel) come from a medical model and are expected to fit in and be accepted by an educational model. Politics are always involved. How can the therapist deal with all of the issues and still put forth maximum effort to treat the student?

...Are we working for the benefit of the student? I have a major concern that often the student is overlooked. We are not coordinating his program to meet his real needs. I feel we all do our own thing well—off in our own space. The student who has difficulty learning is forced into a program that is extremely confusing.

...Coordination of efforts between the administration and all teaching staff is essential in order to integrate students into the mainstreamed environment. Teachers must be informed and prepared to work with students with special needs. This is a critical issue. Without such a team approach the attitude of the regular classroom teacher toward the student with special needs is not one of acceptance.

Recommendations (Students, Curriculum and Related Services)

1. Regulations must be changed in order to allow more flexibility and creativity in meeting the needs of all the students.
2. Establish a competency based, modular system for all of education.
3. The curriculum should have a district-wide plan related to State Education Department mandates with general goals. Modifications of those goals should be allowed so that all students may proceed at their own rate and achieve success.
4. Special education should reflect the overall philosophy of the school district and not merely involve the CSE and special education teachers.
5. Planning and coordination should be considered together. More adequate planning must occur. More people (parents, teachers, administrators, etc.) should be involved, as well as all agencies concerned with meeting students' needs, so that a common agenda can be generated. This would allow for a more effective use of resources and reduce the fragmentation of services.

Regular education teachers are losing a feeling of ownership for their special needs students because of too many pull outs. A feeling exists of "your kids" versus "my kids." Sometimes I am appalled by the lack of basic understanding of learning problems on the part of the regular classroom teacher.



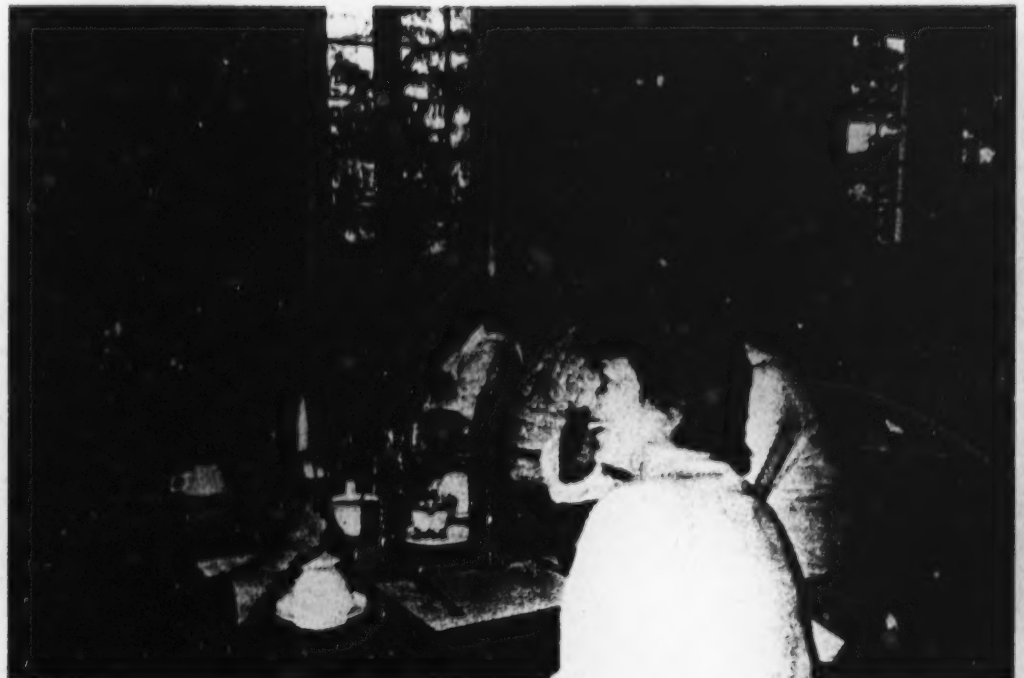
6. District administration and staff should work together to develop an equivalent credit bearing program for special education students working toward a high school diploma.

7. More curriculum options for all children should be created, particularly those who are considered to be at risk.

8. Stronger team approaches are needed. Assign a professional, perhaps a social worker, to act as a case coordinator to better identify problems and needs. Create more links with community service agencies and stronger alliances with parents to alleviate some of the pressures on the special education services team.

9. Establish mechanisms for formal dialogue between special education administrators, teachers, related service providers and representatives of local mental health service providers to build collaborative working relationships.

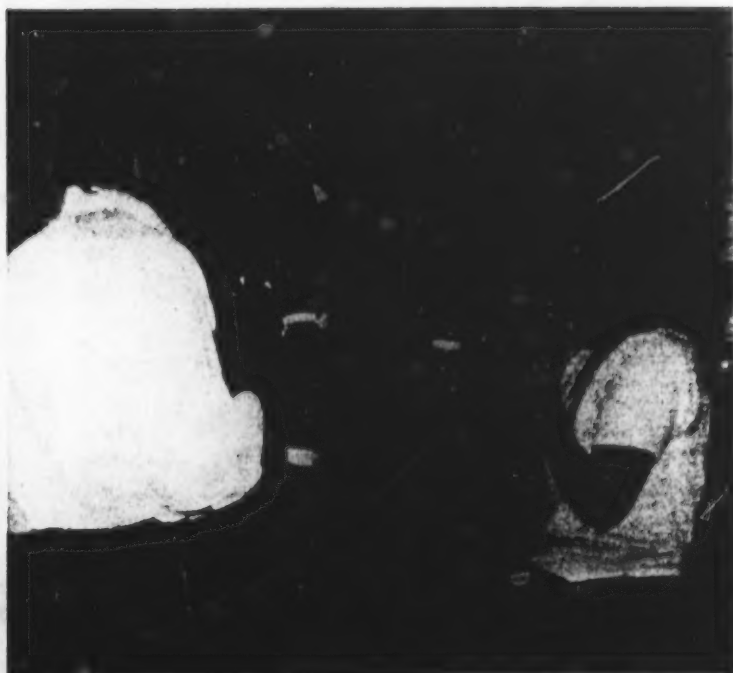
10. Build stronger alliances between the parties responsible for educational issues, issues concerning adult programming and opportunities in the business sector. We must open up new opportunities for students when they leave school.



Mainstreaming

"...It is not a physical or mental condition that constitutes a handicap, but that society's outdated prejudices and practices constitute the most disabling and limiting factors in a person's development. Of course, there are many children with special needs who require special education services. Yet all too frequently, disabled children are being held back from their full learning potential by an educational system which tells them that because they have a disability, they cannot take part in normal activities."
(Edward M. Kennedy, Jr., Executive Director, Facing the Challenge in the Foreword to *Out of the Mainstream*)

The issue of mainstreaming, or the regular education initiative as it is referred to in the professional literature, has been of concern to educators since we began to implement P.L. 94-142. Although the intent of this legislation was to provide an education for children with disabilities in as "normal" a setting as possible; in practice this goal has not been realized. Many children were mainstreamed into regular education classes without anyone fully understanding why it was being done for a particular child. Unfortunately, in many instances this is still the case. However, teachers of both regular and special education seem to be heading toward a more clear definition and a more positive working relationship regarding this complex issue.



I believe that children should be socially integrated for specials, lunch, recess, field trips, etc. A child who really needs a self-contained setting should only continue in that setting until he or she begins to show the ability to branch out. On the other hand, to mainstream a child into a regular academic classroom just for socialization purposes, when that child cannot achieve, defeats the academic process.

Observations

...In most instances, special education teachers mainstream students for two reasons: improved socialization skills and increased academic achievement. When this is not clearly communicated by the special education teacher to those individuals with whom the students are mainstreamed, the result is often confusion and resentment between the professionals. More importantly, the students may feel these stresses or fail in the experience because of them. This type of scenario should be the exception rather than the rule.

...There are a number of avenues by which the traditional mainstreaming issue can be resolved. The two most obvious suggestions pertain to the education of teaching professionals through preservice and inservice training. In addition to this, a strong and more formal structure of communication must be implemented between all teaching professionals who work with a particular mainstreamed student. A quality education cannot be provided if teachers have, at best, five minutes between classes to discuss specific goals for each mainstreamed student.



...Teachers have also altered their definition of mainstreaming in order to include a number of different alternatives. "Regular" students may be brought in to a class for children with handicapping conditions for academic, language or social skills development. Although this is a more structured type of mainstreaming it is often felt to be beneficial for students who are not ready to enter more traditional mainstreamed classes. As limited as this approach is, many consider it a form of mainstreaming.

...Education and communication about the issues surrounding mainstreaming would allow a greater amount of understanding and professional excellence to flourish in an otherwise crippled system. If professionals cannot share ideas and goals about students the system itself may become yet another handicap for the child to rise above. Clearly, this is not our intention.

...I believe that we need recognition and integration of special education under the umbrella of regular education or just education. There is no special education, just education.

...I am a firm believer in the principle of least restrictive environment. At the same time, regular classroom teachers are not generally prepared to meet the needs of mainstreamed special education students. School districts need to invest heavily in their teachers, doing whatever is necessary to provide in-service training for regular classroom teachers. This certainly includes bringing in the top resource people in the field, or sending teachers to centers of knowledge in the field.

...When a student is placed by the CSE according to his or her disability and that problem is addressed, there comes a time to move that student back to a less restrictive environment when certain behaviors are more accepted or tolerated in the self-centered setting.

...While some students with special needs may need isolated settings to meet their needs, isolated or segregated programming should be viewed as a means to an end and not an end in itself. School buildings and educational programs must be designed to include all students, as a matter of course, in school activities.

With terms like competition, accountability, etc., being bandied about in regular education, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find supportive classroom settings in which to integrate children with handicapping conditions. It is often a hostile atmosphere for the child.

Recommendations

1. Special education classes need to have curriculum dealing with self-concept integrated into their programs.
2. All special education students should be a part of any building wide self-concept enhancing programs.
3. All building wide activities should be designed to include special students so that they can participate and compete, if that is the nature of the activity, in a meaningful and fulfilling way.
4. College preparation of teachers should include student teaching experiences with students with special needs as part of the core program.
5. Regular classroom teachers should look for ways to invite special students to participate in their classroom activities.
6. Building administrators should set the tone for including special needs students in building activities and should make it a requirement that each regular classroom teacher become involved in at least one cooperative activity with a special classroom teacher each year.
7. Peer tutoring programs should be instituted in which "regular" students are paired with students with special needs, and older students with special needs are paired with younger students for tutoring purposes.
8. Time should be left in teacher's schedule for conferencing between regular and special education teachers. This mandated conference period would provide an opportunity for ongoing communication and would go a long way towards clearing up misinterpretations and resolving problems.
9. There must be much stronger enforcement of accessibility requirements. Many school buildings are blatantly out of compliance. Mandates are not consistently enforced. Many schools that seem to the casual observer to be accessible are not, and in reality force the isolation of physically challenged students to one floor or section of the building. In these instances, and there are many of them, there is no possibility of mainstreaming.
10. Schools that have been on waivers should be forced to comply with section 504 mandates. Money must be made available to assist such districts if necessary.
11. Issues relating to transportation must be examined. Students in many rural areas, and students who have special transportation needs, are often prevented from participation in less restrictive settings solely because of transportation problems.

Personnel

Special education teachers and administrators are isolated too. We have all been pushed out of the mainstream.

Special education teachers and administrators often suffer from the same isolation from the mainstream as their students do. We are, first of all, educators concerned with teaching children. Efforts must be made to improve communication and information sharing between special and regular education staff. We need to find ways, through preservice and inservice training and through more successful communication to narrow the gap between special education and regular education professionals.

Observations

After P.L. 94-142 there was a major effort to provide pre-service and in-service training and education for regular and special education teachers. That carried on into the early 1980s. Since then the "specific" as contrasted to the "generic" training has been provided primarily by SETRC personnel. We have had a major turnover in staff throughout NYS in the last five years and major regulatory changes in the Part 100 and Part 200 regulations, as well as Chapter One without ongoing generic education and training in special education issues for both regular and special education teachers.

... There is a great need to provide inservice training to classroom teachers at all levels regarding many special education topics and issues. The gap between programs has resulted in isolation for the special education teacher, misunderstanding, and at times, hostility. Too often mainstreaming fails because of a lack of articulation between classroom teachers and special education teachers. Programs must be congruent. The regular program must be meshed with the special education program. This will prevent fragmentation of the school program and promote a team approach.



... Many teachers who teach "normal" classes have no idea about special education students. They do not understand classifications. Many are afraid to take mainstreamed special needs students because of their lack of training in the field. I feel that districts should offer inservice training to all teachers about special education issues. These sessions could be run by the district's special education teachers at no cost to the district. It would help clear up many misconceptions about special education.

... When a student is assigned to a resource room for help or for self-contained primary instruction in the resource room, the teacher of the home room needs to communicate with the special education teacher. I feel that regular teachers need training about what goes on in the resource room. They need to support it.

Recommendations

1. Staff development and planning time needs to be considered as an integral part of the professional role in the schools (not just two superintendent's conference days a year). Program coordination between regular and special education staff should be given a much greater level of importance. This type of ongoing process could gradually eliminate many misconceptions and differences among staff members.
2. Policy governing special education within a school district should integrate regular education specialists. Perhaps if regular education teachers were more involved in providing for special education students, the fragmentation would be decreased.
3. This policy would focus on decreasing the separate demands placed on both regular and special education educators. Often, the responsibility for integration of programming falls to the individual who is fulfilling that role, rather than occurring as part of an overall policy that provides an avenue to interface and work together.
4. Regular and special education teachers and administrators must be held accountable for outcomes in special education.
5. Experienced personnel should be used in leadership roles in special education. High quality in-service education programs on the district level and regional level must be implemented on a systematic basis.
6. P.L. 94-142 and other funds could be used specifically to hire full time special education substitute teachers. This person could be used so that full-time special education staff could be released from classroom activities to meet with parents, other teachers, CSE, related service personnel, etc.

There is a great lack of understanding, knowledge and support of special education by regular educators and administrators and vice versa.

Parents

We are most successful as teachers when we are able to work closely with our students' parents. As we discussed our experiences with and ideas about parents there were mixed emotions. Although there was agreement about the importance of parent/professional partnerships there were no simple answers about how to accomplish this goal.

Observations

There is a need for greater education of parents regarding realistic expectations of the public school system and its staff. Their expectations are often unrealistic, especially as students age into and out of programs. This is when parental anxiety is highest.

...Parents cannot do it all. It is not that they don't want to, they simply do not know how or have too many other things to deal with.

...Parents' role should be rational and realistic. They need to be involved and educated.

...We do not always feel comfortable in our dealings with parents.

...Parents often do not feel comfortable with us. Many times they misunderstand what we are telling them because we use too much jargon. They may feel uncomfortable questioning us or disagreeing with us. Too often they do not know what to expect.

...Parents do not have enough power in the process.

...Parents are not well enough informed—need more education about special education.

...Parents do not understand their own (and their child's) rights.

...Parents sometimes need to be more actively involved in meeting their child's needs.

...Communications between school and home and home and school are often poor.

...Parents are intimidated by the special education process, particularly the CSE.

...Some parents are affected by their own negative school experiences.

...Even when we offer training, etc., it is often difficult to get parents to attend. It is really hard to do. They just do not have the time. They are exhausted by the time they get to the end of their day.



Many Parents Have Become Apathetic:

- They seem to have simply given up after too many years of fighting the battle.
- They don't feel supported in their efforts.
- They are frustrated - "I don't know what to do with him/her."

Feelings of Parental Guilt:

- It is a large issue.
- We have to cut through it first and that is a lot to deal with.
- It does not help the child.

Parents Feel that in this Society it is Not OK to Have a Child with Disabilities:

- Society does not share the burden.
- Society does not provide options.

Recommendations

1. Parents must be treated as partners throughout the entire special education process.
2. Parents should have more control over the process of their child's education. They should be supported in their efforts to care and plan for their children. We must be careful not to make the decisions for them or to encourage an overdependence upon us or the system.
3. Communication is the key to successful partnerships with parents. We must keep the lines of communication open. We must make sure that they know what is happening so that when the time comes to make difficult decisions, we are allies and not enemies.



An issue I struggle with every day is how to engage parents and keep them engaged as they and their children experience special education programs.

The solution will be born out of people becoming more knowledgeable about what has to be done. If parents get smarter, we get smarter. If we don't, we are in big trouble.

The Community

The role of the school in the community is changing. As the needs of students become more complex, schools must depend upon a variety of community resources.

Communities have also come to view schools and school facilities as crucial resources in meeting the needs of children and families in ways that extend beyond the traditional realm of the schools. New partnerships are being forged every day as we become more aware of the need for school/community collaboration in meeting the needs of children and families.

Observations

... It should become more of a school-community function to assume responsibility not only for implementing special education, but also for overseeing the effectiveness of the programs utilized. More emphasis must be placed on retaining the student with special needs in the regular education setting.

... Who is working together to make sure that all of the systems interface?

... The systems are often in direct conflict with each other. You are caught in the middle because you are trying to pull it all together. It really becomes a community responsibility. It goes beyond the professional, the family or the school.

... There must be more community support systems in place to take over at night, on weekends and during school vacations.

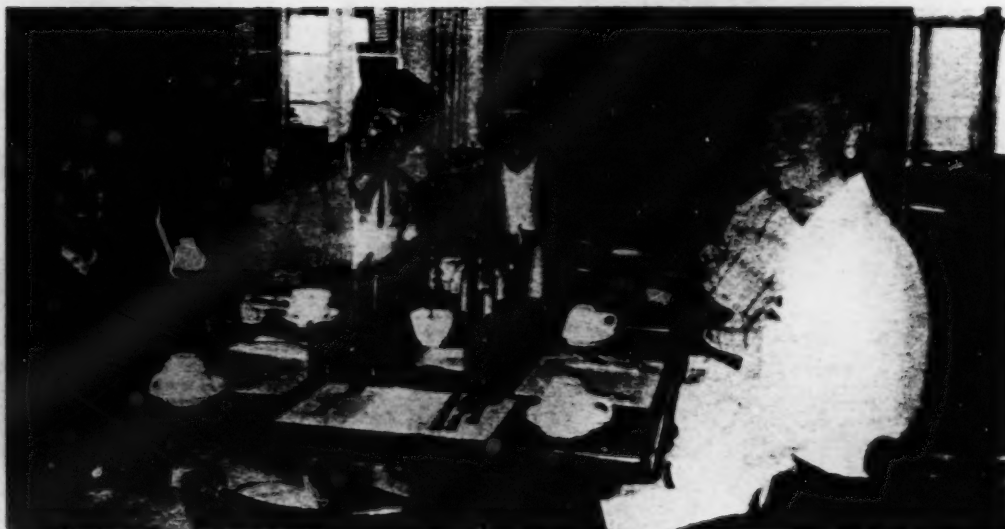
... What support services are available? I am in the classroom and I do not have the time to find out what is available. There is so much out there that most of us know nothing about. It is overwhelming. It is difficult.

... Too many expectations fall upon the school system.



Recommendations

1. School districts and local mental health providers must develop formal and informal collaborative working relationships to help each other deal in a cooperative manner with those students who are experiencing emotional, social, psychiatric and familial distress that renders them dysfunctional in classrooms.
2. There should be a staff member in each school who is familiar with all of the community resources and how to access them; someone who is aware of student needs and can coordinate the process.
3. There should be more effective interagency collaboration and planning between the various state agencies responsible for children's services in coordination with providers on the county or community level.
4. Models of service coordination that have been proven to be effective should be replicated. An example of this type of coordination is the unified services approach used in Rensselaer county.
5. The community schools project sponsored by SED should be carefully watched and evaluated. If they are successful they should be replicated in more communities, with the support of state level funding. Strong incentives should be put in place for schools that become involved in this model.
6. School utilization policies should be re-examined and modified to allow for more community utilization of school facilities for such purposes as before and after school child care, respite care, co-location of health and social service clinics, etc.





Endpiece

Special education is a process both in its development and implementation. As such, it is continuously evolving and growing...movement which naturally causes anxiety, stress, excitement and challenge.

In its evolution, special education has progressed from a separate educational system to one in which words like partnership, interaction and collaboration have become standards. Parents, regular education and special educators, support personnel and community are moving away from exclusionary practices and toward a common goal.

Special education must continue pursuing its goal of providing students with skills and experiences which will enable them to succeed socially, academically and vocationally to the extent of their individual capabilities. A long term perspective must be maintained while endeavoring to meet immediate unique needs in an effort to continuously evaluate direction and effectiveness. In persevering with a critical focus, we must never be fearful of warranted change.

Every child is special and the consideration of appropriate quality education for all children is our highest priority.

Let us ask what we
want for our children,
then let us
ask not less for all
children.

"Preamble", Report to the President, White House
Conference On Children, 1970.
